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LITTLE ELVISES

A JUNIOR BENDER MYSTERY



TIMOTHY HALLINAN

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Little Elvises

A Junior Bender Mystery

TIMOTHY HALLINAN

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For Ken and Mike

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From behind his little pile of crumpled Tootsie Roll wrappers, DiGaudio said, “We can make you for the Hammer job.”

The Tootsie Roll wrappers were the only thing on the table, now that police stations are no-smoking zones. I’ve got nothing against health, but if there’s anyone in the world who needs a cigarette, it’s a crook in a police station.

“I’d emit an outraged squeal of innocence,” I said, “except I don’t have to. I didn’t do the Hammer job.”

DiGaudio scratched his cheek. I could hear the whiskers under his nails. “I’m going to extend you a courtesy I usually don’t offer career criminals,” he said. “I’m going to believe you.”

I would have pushed my chair back but it was bolted to the floor. I said, “This is too easy.”

“You think? Well, you’re right. See, it doesn’t matter whether you did it. What matters is that we can make you for it.”

I was *already* not happy. Since I’m a career criminal, to use DiGaudio’s description—and who might as well, since it’s accurate—I rarely have scrapbook moments in an interrogation room. But now we were in new territory, even for me. It didn’t matter whether I did it?

Just to test the depth of the tar pit, I said, “I have an alibi.”

DiGaudio folded his hands over his continental belly, a belly big enough to have a capital city. I could remember when he was a trim-waisted patrolman with laundry-scrubber abs and a three-pack-a-day nicotine habit. When he made detective, four or five years back, he traded cigarettes for calories, and now he looked like something you might toss a peanut at. “You probably oughta call the people you were with that night,” he said. “Just, you know, match your memory with theirs.”

This was *especially* not good. Generally speaking, even the worst cops don’t intimidate witnesses.

“The Hammer job,” I said. “As I recall, there was a gun involved.”

DiGaudio nodded. He had a cop’s eyes, eyes that had seen so much they looked frayed. For the moment, he used them to check out an interrogation room he’d seen a thousand times. He’d put me in one of the nicest in the Van Nuys station. Had a floor and everything. Looking up at a corner of the ceiling, he said, “Special circumstances.”

“You know that’s not my style,” I said. “I mean, assuming that I steal things in the first place is a laughable proposition, but even if I did, I wouldn’t be dumb enough to use a gun. As pretty much everyone knows.”

“Sure,” DiGaudio said. “Everyone knows that you don’t steal stuff, since you’ve never actually been convicted of stealing stuff, and everybody also knows that if you *did* steal stuff you’d be too smart to go in strapped. Because of—what was that phrase? The one I ju

used?”

“Special circumstances,” I said.

“That was it. And if you got made for robbery under special circumstances, especially against people like the Hammers, who demand and receive the very best in law enforcement, him being a circuit court judge and all, and her a little old lady, weighs about eighty pounds getting pistol-whipped, you’d probably be looking at twenty years.” He reached into the inside pocket of his Quintuple XL sport coat, courtesy of the local Tall Porkers outlet, and brought out a couple more Halloween-size Tootsie Rolls. “Want one?”

“I’ll get by without it,” I said.

“I wouldn’t have given it to you anyway.” He tugged the twists at the ends of the paper wrapper. “I like two at a time.” He popped the first into his mouth and unwrapped the second, parking the first one in his right cheek. The wrappers fluttered down onto the little pile on the table.

“DiGaudio,” I said. “Are we being recorded?”

“You crazy?” His teeth were stuck together but the words were understandable.

“Just checking. Let’s review. You threaten to make me for a robbery you know I didn’t pull, and you’ve intimidated the three people who could verify my alibi, which you know is straight, and you keep bringing the conversation around to special circumstances, just to remind me that I don’t want to be here. My guess is that we’re working our way toward an act of generosity on your part.”

For a count of ten, or twenty if you’ve had a lot of coffee, DiGaudio gave all his attention to chewing his chocolate cud. Tootsie Rolls demand a lot of chewing. When he’d gotten the candy soft enough so he could pry his teeth apart, he said, “My name mean anything to you?”

“Sure,” I said. “It’s a synonym for all that’s admirable in law enforcement.”

He waved a fat hand, the back fringed with black hair, in the direction of his left shoulder meaning *earlier*. “Beyond that.”

I said, “Philadelphia in the fifties. Imitation Elvises. Handsome Italian kids with tight pants and big hair.”

He gave me a rich brown grin. Tootsie Rolls are a truly awful color. “How the hell do you remember that?”

“Rina,” I said. “My daughter.”

He squinted over my shoulder. “You got a daughter? She proud of her daddy?”

“Hey, fatso,” I said, “I haven’t punched you in the face yet, but that could change.”

DiGaudio flushed, and the worn-out little eyes got even smaller. “Any time,” he said. “Here or anywhere.”

“You start it, you’d better be ready to finish it.” I was past caring about anything he could do to me, legally speaking.

He passed a pink tongue over his brown teeth. Whatever he found there, it seemed to calm him down. “So, your daughter. What’s she got to do with—”

I gave myself a three-heartbeat break to get my voice under control. “She’s thirteen,” I said. “But she’s in an accelerated program, and she wrote a paper called ‘The Distorted Mirror’ for some class they didn’t have when I was in school.”

“ ‘The Distorted—’ ”

“Mirror. About the way American pop culture imitates itself, the way it stamps out little t

copies of anything original that makes money. The example she chose was all the Little Elvies from Philly who were churned to the surface in the wake of Elvis Presley.”

“*Churned to the surface.*” He burped. “Colorful phrase.”

“It’s Rina’s. So after Elvis you had all these junior goombahs, all these Bobbies and Billies and Frankies and Fabios and so forth, popping up on *American Dance Hall* and selling lots of records for about six weeks each. And the guy behind them all, according to Rina’s paper, was somebody named DiGaudio.”

“Vinnie.”

“Oh, please,” I said.

“No. Really. Vinnie. Went by Vincent because, well, because who wants to be called Vinnie? But anyway, it was Vinnie DiGaudio, Vincent L. DiGaudio, who found all those kids and made them stars—”

“Shooting stars, Rina calls them.”

“Because they went by so fast, right? But they all made a bunch of money, and Vinnie managed to get most of it into his pockets.”

“As interesting as this is, sort of a tiny-print footnote to the pop music history of the fifties. I’m not sure what it has to do with the Hammer job.”

“Act of generosity,” DiGaudio said. “Remember?”

I may be slow sometimes, but I’m not dead. “Vinnie DiGaudio,” I said. “He’s a relative.”

“My uncle. My dad’s brother. Family, you know? We’re Italian, family means something.”

“I’ve never understood why all the non-WASP groups think they own the concept of family. Italians, Jews, Chinese, Latinos—they’ve all got real *families*. Like WASP families are just groups of people who are close to each other in the phone book.”

“Look at ’em on TV,” DiGaudio said. “They come downstairs every morning and shake hands.”

“Mobbed up?”

“Say what?”

“Your whatever-he-is. Is he mobbed up?”

DiGaudio wiped at his upper teeth with the tip of his index finger and then checked it out. “Italian?” he said. “In Philly? In the music business? Why would you think he was—”

“And he’s your *uncle*?”

He said, “How far back in the conversation would you like me to go? Did you miss most of it, or just bits and pieces?”

“I just want to make sure you’re telling me your uncle is mobbed up. At least now I know we’re not being taped.”

DiGaudio spread the pork chops he used as hands, his imitation of someone being reasonable. “You always this suspicious? You miss a lot in life, you go around suspecting everybody all the time.”

“You know,” I said, “if I go to work for you and the word gets around, I’ll be lucky there’s enough left of me to identify.”

He looked so surprised his eyes got bigger. “Work for *me*?”

“Okay. What am I missing?”

“See, suspicion, it’s a poisonous thing. You think I’m looking to force you to do something for me, and all I’m doing is bringing you a piece of business.”

“Business.”

“We know—and by *we* I mean a very small number of my colleagues—we know that you do sort of lost-and-found detective stuff for people on the other side of the fence.”

“It’s good it’s a small number,” I said, “because they’re wrong.”

“There’s Wattles, who’s like an executive thug,” he said, holding up a finger. “Three-Eye Romero, the Valley’s leading car-chopper. The Queen of Crime herself, Trey Annunziato.” He had three fingers in the air. “You tell me what these three people have in common.”

“Good accountants?”

“*You*,” he said. “They got you in common. They all had a little problem and they all went to the go-to guy for crooks with problems. You. Junior Bender, boy crimebuster.” He pulled out another Tootsie Roll. “It’s like that distorted mirror you were talking about. You’re a crook but you’re the crooks’ cop, too.”

“Okay,” I said, “just to see if we can’t wrap this up before we both die of old age, you’re saying you won’t make me for the Hammer job—which I didn’t do—if I help your uncle, the Philly music crook. And I’m saying to you that the whole thing about me, that stuff about solving crimes for crooks, it’s wrong. And even if it were right, and I really did solve crimes for crooks, I’d need to know exactly what your uncle needs help with, because I won’t go anywhere near murder. If I were doing it at all, that is, which of course, I’m not. So what’s his problem?”

DiGaudio said, “Murder.”

The month's motel was Marge 'n Ed's North Pole at the north end of North Hollywood. The advantage of staying at the North Pole was that even the small number of people who knew I'd lived in motels since my divorce from Kathy would never figure I'd stoop that low. The disadvantage of staying at the North Pole was everything else.

Generally speaking, motels have little to recommend them, and the North Pole had less than most. But they made me a moving target, and I could more or less control the extent to which anyone knew where I was at any given time. I'd been divorced almost three years, and the North Pole was my 34th motel, and far and away the worst of the bunch.

I'd been put into Blitzen. In an explosion of creativity, Marge 'n Ed had decided not to number the rooms. Since Clement Moore only named so many reindeer in "The Night Before Christmas," Marge 'n Ed had pressed Rudolph into service and then come up with some names on their own. Thus, in addition to the reindeer we all know and love, we had rooms named Dydie, Witzel, Tinkie, and Doris.

Doris wasn't actually being passed off as a reindeer. She was Marge 'n Ed's daughter. Marge, who grew confidential as the evenings wore on and the level in the vodka bottle dropped, had told me one night that Doris had fled the North Pole with someone Marge referred to as *Mr. Pinkie Ring*, a pinkie ring being, in Marge's cosmology, the surest sign of a cad. And sure enough, the cad had broken Doris's heart, but would she come home? No, Doris. Stubborn as her father, by whom I assumed Marge meant Ed, whom I always thought of as 'n Ed. Ed was no longer with us, having departed this vale of sorrows six years earlier. It was probably either that or somehow orchestrate a global ban on vodka, and death undoubtedly looked easier.

The string of Christmas lights that outlined the perimeter of Blitzen's front window blinked at me in no discernible sequence, and I'd been trying to discern one for days. They sprang to life whenever anyone turned on the ceiling light, which was the only light in the room. I tried to pull the cord from the outlet, but Marge 'n Ed had glued it in place.

"YouTube-dot-com," Rina said on the phone. "Y-O-U-Tube, spelled like *tube*. Aren't you there yet?"

Something unpleasant happens even to the most agreeable of adolescents when they talk to adults about technology. A certain kind of grit comes into their voices, as though they're expecting to meet an impenetrable wall of stupidity and might have to sand their way through it. Rina, who still, so far as I knew, admired at least one or two aspects of my character, was no exception. She sounded like her teeth had been wired together.

"Yes," I said, hearing myself echo her tone. "I've managed somehow to enter the wonderland of video detritus and I await only the magical search term that will let me sift the chaff."

“Dad. Do you want help, or not?”

“I do,” I said, “but not in a tone of voice that says *I’d better talk really slowly or he’ll get his thumb stuck in his nostril again.*”

“Do I sound like that?”

“A little.”

“Sorry. Okay, the interview is called ‘Vincent DiGaudio Interview.’ Have you got that?”

“Slow down,” I said. “Did you just ask me whether I can follow the idea that the Vincent DiGaudio Interview is called ‘Vincent DiGaudio Interview?’”

“Oh.” She made a clucking noise I’ve never been able to duplicate. “Sorry again.”

“Maybe I’m being touchy,” I said. “Thanks. Anything else?”

“Not on video. I’ll email you the links to the other stuff, the written stuff. There’s not much of it. He doesn’t seem to have wanted much publicity.”

“Wonder why,” I said. I figured there was no point in telling her I was going to be getting involved with a mob guy. She might worry.

She said, “But the FBI files are kind of interesting.”

“Excuse me?”

“Somebody used the Freedom of Information Act,” said my thirteen-year-old daughter, “to file for release of a stack of FBI files on the outfit’s influence in the Philadelphia music scene. Since DiGaudio’s still alive and since he never got charged, his name is blacked out, but it’s easy to tell it’s him because a lot of the memos are about Giorgio. The files are on the FBI website, but I’ll send you the link so you don’t have to waste time poking around.”

“The FBI site?” I said. “Giorgio?”

“Wake up, Dad. Everything’s online.”

Was I, a career criminal, going to log onto *the FBI site*? “Who’s Giorgio?”

“The most pathetic of DiGaudio’s little Elvises. Really pretty, I mean fruit-salad pretty, but he couldn’t do *anything*. Tone deaf. He stood on the stage like his feet were nailed to the floor. But really, really pretty.”

“I don’t remember him in the paper you wrote.” I was taking a chance here, because I hadn’t actually read all of it.

“I didn’t talk about him much. He was so awful that he kind of stood alone. He wasn’t an imitation anything, really. He was an original void.”

“But pretty.”

“Yum yum yum.”

“Thanks, sweetie. I’ll check it out.”

“You can look at Giorgio on YouTube, too,” she said. “Although you might want to turn the volume way, way down.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “It’s under ‘Giorgio.’ ”

“Try ‘Giorgio Lucky Star.’ That was the name of his first hit. ‘Lucky Star,’ I mean. Little irony there, huh? If there was ever a lucky star, it was Giorgio. If it hadn’t been for Elvis, he’d have been delivering mail. Not that it did him much good in the long run, poor kid. Anyway, search for ‘Giorgio Lucky Star.’ Otherwise you’re going to spend the whole evening looking at Giorgio Armani.”

“Is your mom around?”

A pause I’d have probably missed if I weren’t her father. “Um, out with Bill.”

“Remember what I told you,” I said. “Whatever you do, don’t laugh at Bill’s nose.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Bill’s nose.”

“Just, whatever happens, next time you see Bill’s nose, don’t laugh at it.”

“Daddy,” she said. “You’re terrible.” She made a kiss noise and hung up.

It was okay that I was terrible. She only called me Daddy when she liked me.

I’ve had more opportunity than most people to do things I’d regret later, and I’ve taken advantage of a great many of those opportunities. But there was nothing I regretted more than not being able to live in the same house as my daughter.

I’d wanted to stay in Donder, but it was taken.

“Donder” is a convincing name for a reindeer. “Blitzen” sounds to me like the name of some Danish Nazi collaborator, someone who committed high treason in deep snow. But Donder was occupied, so I was stuck with either Blitzen or Dydie. I chose Blitzen because it was on the second floor, which I prefer, and it had a connecting door with Prancer, which was unoccupied, so I could rent them both but leave the light off in one of them, giving me a second room to duck into in an emergency, a configuration I insist on. This little escape hatch that has probably saved me from a couple of broken legs, broken legs being a standard method of getting someone’s attention in the world of low-IQ crime. And as much as I didn’t like the name “Blitzen,” there was no way I was going to stay in Prancer. It would affect the way I thought about myself.

Blitzen was a small, airless rectangle with dusty tinsel fringing the tops of the doors, curtains of snowflakes dangling from the ceiling, and fluffs of cotton glued to the top of the medicine cabinet. A pyramid of glass Christmas-tree ornaments had been glued together, and then the whole assemblage had been glued to a red-and-green platter, which in turn had been glued to the top of the dresser. Marge ’n Ed went through a lot of glue. The carpet had been snowy white fifteen or twenty years ago, but was now the precise color of guilt, a brownish gray like a dusty spiderweb, interrupted here and there by horrific blotches of darkness, as though aliens with pitch in their veins had bled out on it. The first time I saw it, it struck me as a perfect picture of a guilty conscience at 3 A.M.: you’re floating along in a sort of pasteurized colorlessness, and *wham*, here comes a black spot that has you bolt upright and sweating in the dark.

I have a nodding acquaintance with guilty consciences.

When Andy Warhol predicted that everyone in the future would be famous for fifteen minutes, he was probably thinking about something like YouTube. What a concept: hundreds of thousands of deservedly anonymous people made shaky, blurry videotapes of their pees and their feet and each other lip-synching to horrible music, and somebody bought it for a trillion dollars. But then all this idea-free content developed a kind of mass that attracted a million or so clips that actually *had* some interest value, especially to those of us who occasionally like to lift a corner of the social fabric and peer beneath it.

Vincent DiGaudio Interview popped onto my screen in the oddly saturated color, heavy toward the carrot end of the spectrum, that identifies TV film from the seventies. Since I was going to meet DiGaudio in about forty minutes, I took a good look at him. In 1975, he’d been a beefy, ethnic-looking guy with a couple of chins and a third on the way, and a plump little mouth that he kept pursing as though he had Tourette’s Syndrome and was fighting a

outbreak of profanity. His eyes were the most interesting things in his face. They were long with heavy, almost immobile lids that sloped down toward the outer corners at about thirty-degree angle, the angle of a roof. His gaze bounced nervously between the interviewer and the camera lens.

Vincent DiGaudio had a liar's eyes.

As the clip began, the camera was on the interviewer, a famished woman with a tangerine-colored face, blond hair bobbed so brutally it looked like it had been cut with a broken bottle, and so much gold hanging around her neck she wouldn't have floated in the Great Salt Lake. "... define your talent?" she was saying when the editor cut in.

"I don't know if it was a talent," DiGaudio said, and then smiled in a way that suggested that it was, indeed, a talent, and he was a deeply modest man. "I seen a vacuum, that's all. I always think that's the main thing, seeing in between the stuff that's already there, like it's a dotted line, and figuring out what could fill in the blanks, you know?" He held his hands up about two feet apart, presumably indicating a blank. "So you had Elvis and the other one, um, Jerry Lee Lewis, and then you had Little Richard, and they were all like on one end, you know? Too raw, too downtown for nice kids. And then you had over on the other end, you had Pat Boone, and he was like Mr. Good Tooth, you know, like in a kids' dental hygiene movie, there's always this tooth that's so white you gotta squint at it. So he was way over there. And in the middle, I seen a lot of room for kids who were handsome like Elvis but not so, you know, so ..."

"Talented?" the interviewer asked.

"That's funny," DiGaudio said solemnly. "Not so dangerous. Good-looking kids, but kids that girls could take home to meet Mom. Kids who look like they went to church."

"Elvis went to church," the interviewer said.

DiGaudio's smile this time made the interviewer sit back a couple of inches. "My kids went to a *white* church. Probably Catholic, since they were all Italian, but, you know, might have been some Episcopalians in there. And they didn't sing about a man on a fuzzy tree or all that shorthand about getting—can I say getting laid?"

"You just did."

"Yeah, well that. My kids sang about first kisses and lucky stars, and if they sang about a sweater it was a sweater with a high school letter on it, not a sweater stretched over a bare pair of—of—inappropriate body parts." He sat back and let his right knee jiggle up and down, a body language that suggested he'd rather be anywhere else in the world. "It's all in the book," he said. "My book. Remember my book?"

"Of course." The interviewer held it up for the camera. "*The Philly Miracle*," she said.

"And the rest of it?" Di Gaudio demanded.

"Sorry. *The Philly Miracle: How Vincent DiGaudio Reinvented Rock and Roll*."

"Bet your ass," DiGaudio said. "Whoops."

"So your—your *discoveries*—were sort of Elvis with mayo?"

"We're not getting along much, are we? My kids weren't animals. I mean lookit what Elvis was doing on the stage. All that stuff with his, you know, his—getting the little girls a little crazy."

The interviewer shook her head. "They screamed for your boys, too."

He made her wait a second while he stared at her. "And? I mean, what's your point? Girl"

been screaming and fainting at singers since forever. But you knew if a girl fainted around one of my kids he wouldn't take advantage of it. He'd just keep singing, or maybe get first aid or something."

She rapped her knuckles on the book's cover. "There were a lot of them, weren't there?"

DiGaudio's face darkened. "Lot of what?"

"Your kids, your singers. Some people called it the production line."

"Yeah, well, some people can bite me. People who talk like that, they don't know, they don't know kids. These were *crushes*, not love affairs. The girls weren't going to marry my guys, they were going to buy magazines with their pictures on the front and write the guy's names all over everything, and fifteen minutes later they were going to get a crush on the next one. So there had to be a next one. Like junior high, but with better looking boys. Girls that age, she's a crush machine, or at least they were back then. These days, who knows? No much innocence around now, but that's what my kids were. They were innocence. They were, like, dreams. They were never gonna knock the girls up, or marry them and drink too much and kick them around, or turn out to be as gay as a lamb chop, or anything like guys do in real life. They were dreams, you know? They came out, they looked great, they sang for two and a half minutes, and then they went away."

"And they did go away. Most of them vanished without a trace. Are you still in touch with any of them?"

It didn't seem like a rough question, but DiGaudio's eyes bounced all over the room. He filled his cheeks with air and blew it out in an exasperated puff. "That ain't true. Some of them, they're still working. Frankie does lounges in Vegas. Eddie and Fabio, they tour all over the place with a pickup band, call themselves Faces of the Fifties or something like that. They're around, some of them."

"And Bobby? Bobby Angel?"

"Nobody knows what happened to Bobby. Somebody must of told you that, even if you didn't bother to read the book. Bobby disappeared."

"Do you ever think about Giorgio?"

The fat little mouth pulled in until it was as round as a carnation. "Giorgio," he finally said. He sounded like he wanted to spit. "Giorgio was different. He didn't like it, you know? Even when he was a big star. Didn't think he belonged up there."

"A lot of people agreed with him."

DiGaudio leaned forward. "What is this, the Cheap Shot Hour? Even somebody like you, after what happened to that poor kid, even someone like you ought to think a couple times before piling on. Who are you, anyway? Some local talent on a TV station in some two-garage station market. I mean, look at this set, looks like a bunch of second graders colored it—"

"This is obviously a touchy topic for—"

"You know, I came on this show to talk about a book, to tell a story about music in Philadelphia, about when your audience was young, about a different kind of time, and what do I get? Miss Snide of 1927, with your *bleeping* jack-o'-lantern makeup and that lawn-mower hair—"

"So, if I can get an answer, what are your thoughts about Giorgio?"

DiGaudio reached out and covered the camera lens with his hand. There were a couple of heavily bleeped remarks, and then the screen went to black.

“My, my,” I said. “Touchy guy.” I glanced at my watch. DiGaudio lived in Studio City, west south of Ventura Boulevard, in the richest, whitest part of the Valley. I had another thirty-five minutes, and the trip would only take fifteen. I typed in *Giorgio Lucky Star*.

And found myself looking at fifties black-and-white, the fuzzy kinescope that’s all we have of so much early television, just a movie camera aimed at a TV screen, the crude archival footage that the cameraman’s union insisted on. Without that clause in their contract, almost all the live television of the fifties would be radiating out into space, the laugh tracks of the long-dead provoking slack-jawed amazement among aliens sixty light years away, but completely lost here on earth.

Even viewed through pixels the size of thumbtacks, Giorgio was a beautiful kid. And Ring was right: he couldn’t do anything. He stood there as though he’d been told he’d be shot if he moved, and mouthed his way through two minutes of pre-recorded early sixties crap-rock. Since the face was everything and he wasn’t doing anything with the rest of himself anyway, the cameras pretty much stayed in closeups, just fading from one shot to another. No matter where they put the camera, he looked good. He had the same classical beauty as Presley. Like Presley, if you’d covered his face in white greasepaint and taken a still closeup, you’d have had a classical statue, a cousin of Michelangelo’s *David*.

But unlike the sculpted David, who stares into his future with the calm certainty of someone who knows that God is holding his team’s pom-poms on the sidelines, Giorgio had the look you see in a crooked politician who’s just been asked the one question he’d been promised he wouldn’t be asked, in the athlete who’s been told he has to take the drug test but knows he’s going to fail.

Giorgio was terrified.

The house looked like a box designed to hold four eggs, a pyramid, and part of Niagara Falls. Hung irregularly with windows the way some people put up pictures, it was an exercise in geometrical schizophrenia, squares connected to rectangles and triangles and parallelograms and irregular trapezoids and other useless shapes, plunked down on a view lot. Maybe nine thousand square feet, one story high, meandering drunkenly over half an acre. It was a burglar's nightmare. Just finding your way back out would be a challenge.

The door was yanked open by a grim-looking, artificially black-haired, defiantly elderly woman as tall as I was, with a protruding chin-mole on the left side of a protruding chin, NE shoulders, and severely muscled calves beneath her black skirt. The calves looked like they evolved to hold the planet still while she walked. Her hair was drawn back into a tight bun and further restrained by a hairnet. The overall effect was the apple-bearing witch in Snow White on steroids. She banged the door against the wall, glared at me, grunted as though the worst suspicions of a long lifetime had just been confirmed, turned her broad back, and started to hike down the hall. I followed, and she said, without looking back, "Close it."

I shut the door while she waited for me, tapping a booted foot, and then I followed her for what seemed like ten minutes across a pale wood floor that zigzagged through rooms of all shapes, any one of which would have done fine as a living room, until we reached a semicircular space with an enormous window, a single molded pane of curved glass that stretched the length of the rounded wall to reveal the lights of the Valley glittering expensively below. Beneath the glass was a curved sofa in white leather, exactly the same length as the window. And dead center on the sofa, behind a curving coffee table in bleached wood, was Vincent L. DiGaudio.

Grandma Atlas ushered me into the room, announced, "Your mistake's arrived," and stepped aside with the air of someone who's completed an unpleasant task.

DiGaudio was a lot wider now than he'd been when he did the YouTube interview in 1977. Like a lot of guys who've run to fat, he'd been told that dressing in black from head to toe would make him look like Fred Astaire. His hair was dyed the same black as the woman's, dead black that ate light without reflecting any. He'd also grown a little soul patch. It clung uncertainly to his lower lip, like a misplaced comma.

"You don't look like much," DiGaudio said without getting up.

"You get what you pay for."

He replayed the sentence, half-moving his lips. "I ain't paying you nothing."

"We'll discuss that later. Could you ask Frau Blücher here to get me something to drink? Diet Coke or something."

"That stuff will take the chrome off a bumper."

"Then it's a good thing I'm not a 1957 Chevy."

“What I mean, we don’t got it. We got fruit juices and natural sodas, got a bunch of kinds of bottled water.”

“Whatever’s easy,” I said.

“What’s easy,” the woman said, “is you stay thirsty.”

“Your mom?” I asked DiGaudio. “Or a rental for the evening?”

“Hey, buster,” the woman said.

“*Buster?*” I said. “You allow her to call your guests buster?”

“This is Popsie,” DiGaudio said. “Popsie can call you whatever she wants.”

“You’re the one who has to live with her. Water, out of the tap, would be fine.”

Popsie said, “*Pssshhhhhh*,” with a disgusted shake of the head and barged out of the room towing a vast amount of negative energy behind her. I half expected to see all the metal objects in the room drag themselves in her wake.

“You don’t want to fuck with Popsie,” DiGaudio said after the door closed behind her. “She used to wrestle. WWF, no less.”

“What’d she call herself?”

“Hilda, the Queen of the Gestapo.”

“And this qualified her for what job description?”

He shifted his bulk, tried to cross his left leg over his right, and failed. He brought the leg up again, grabbed the calf with both hands, and forced it into place. “What do you care?”

“Just making conversation. Why’d she call me your mistake?”

“Popsie’s got strong opinions. Figures anybody Paulie sends will be a fuckup. She thinks I should just sit around waiting for the cops to come and get me.”

“Before you tell me why they might come and get you, let’s do a fact check. This isn’t free.”

He brought up a heavily ringed hand. Primed by Marge, I checked for a pinky ring, and found one. The man was a cad. “Scuse me?” DiGaudio said. “Correct me if I’m wrong, okay? Paulie’s got one of your nuts in a vise—”

“Paulie?”

He opened his mouth a couple of times but nothing came out. He wasn’t used to being interrupted. “My nephew,” he finally said. “Paulie.”

“Jesus. Vinnie, Paulie. *Popsie*. Where are Vito and Sonny? Why not just hang some neon signs in the window, *MOBS R US*.”

He shook his head, just a general rejection of anything I might have to say. “Like I was saying, Paulie’s got one of your nuts in a vise, and what you’re trying to do is keep the other one out.”

“What I’m trying to do is walk away from this with an even number. But I have some rules about what I do, and here they are: No mob guys, no murder cases, and no freebies. I’ve had to break One and Two just to get here tonight, but I’ll be damned if I’ll break Three. If you want to talk for more than sixty seconds, if you want to tell me about your problems with the cops, I need five thousand in my hand. In cash. If you don’t want to pay, I’ll walk out of here and Paulie can do whatever he wants.”

He’d lifted his chin to look at me better, and I could see all the work that had been done to keep him looking younger than the seventy-five, seventy-six years old he had to be. He’d been lifted, sanded, scrubbed, buffed, peeled, and Botoxed until the face under the dead black

hair looked like it was made from some misguided new synthetic, *Sim-U-Life* or something.

“You think I got five thousand just laying around?”

“Sure,” I said.

The plump little mouth pursed, so there were some muscles the Botox hadn’t reached. “You any good?”

“I’m fucking fantastic. And, no, I won’t give you referrals.”

He said, “Pfuhhh,” and I realized it was a laugh of sorts. “Guess not. Okay, say I give you the five. Then what?”

“Then you explain what’s going on and I tell you whether I can do anything about it. If I can’t, I give you half of the five back and go home and wait for Paulie to show up with his advise. If I *can*, you give me more money whenever I ask for it, up to about fifty thousand depending.”

“Fifty?” He cracked his knuckles so emphatically I got sympathetic joint pain in both hands. “Depending on what?”

“On how tough it is. On whether I have to kill anybody. Generally speaking, I prefer not to kill anybody.”

The door banged open, and Popsie barged into the room with a cheap plastic glass in one hand. She’d filled it to the brim, and as she shoved it at me, water slopped onto my forearm and down the front of my trousers. Then she wheeled around and stalked out.

“Of course,” I said, watching her, “in some cases, I’d give you a discount.”

He grinned at the stains on my pants. “Ahhh, she’s okay.”

“Yeah?” I said, and I leaned over the coffee table and poured water in his lap.

“What the *fuck*,” he said, trying to get up, but his left leg was stuck on top of his right, and even if it hadn’t been, he was too bulky to rise without pushing off with his hands. He got his foot on the floor and then sat there, breathing at me.

“Keep the help under control,” I said. “And give me the money. I’m not having fun, and I’m not going to go on not having fun for much longer without getting paid for it.”

“Jeez,” he said. “And Paulie thinks you’re soft.”

I said, “Money.”

He opened a drawer in the coffee table. “You didn’t have to get me wet.”

“You’ll dry.”

He had a stack of hundreds in his hand. “I don’t know about this.”

“You see the gun in my hand?” I said. “Am I threatening you? I’d just as soon go home.”

“Sheesh,” he said, flipping the stack of bills with his thumb. “Is it okay if I talk while you count?”

“If you can.”

“Oh, back off. I was counting money when you were still messing your pants.” He licked his thumb and started dealing hundreds onto the table. “Guy got killed in Hollywood three nights ago. You hear anything about it?”

“Is this what we’re here to talk about?”

“Nah,” DiGaudio said. “I always kick off a conversation this way.”

“Then keep counting.” I watched the stack grow. “Where?”

His hands didn’t slow at all. “Hollywood Boulevard.”

“Somebody got killed on Hollywood Boulevard? Boy, that hardly ever happens.”

“I don’t know if he got killed there.” He was up to twenty-seven hundred, hands moving fast and sure. “He got found there. Six thousand block, pretty crappy block even for Hollywood. Might have been killed somewhere else.”

“Who was he?”

He looked up, the stack in his left hand, a single bill in his right. “English journalist. Scumbag hound, wrote for the rat rags, the ones with the two-headed babies on the front page. *Bat Boy Graduates from Princeton*, *Maharishi’s Face on Mars*, that kind of shit. Name of Derek Bigelow.

“Friend of yours?”

“Sure, same way I’d make friends with a herpes wart.”

“And?”

“Hold on.” He dropped the last five bills onto the pile. “And what?”

I picked up the money. “And what’s it got to do with you?”

He looked at me as though he’d just realized he’d been speaking a language I didn’t understand. “What it’s got to *do* with me? They’re going to arrest me for it.”

“Did you do it?”

“Are you sure you’re any good? ’Cause, I mean, what kind of question is that?”

“Humor me. Did you?”

“No. But, I mean, would I say yes? What’re you, furniture?”

“Then why are they going to arrest you for it?”

“*There’s* the question,” he said. “Finally.”

I waited for a good slow count of three. “Want me to ask it again?”

“For five thousand bucks? Sure.”

“Why are they going to arrest you for it?”

“Because I was *going* to kill him. I was going to kill him tonight.”

“Louie,” I said into the phone as I navigated a tight curve, which seemed to be the only kind they had up here. “I need to talk to you.”

“Everybody needs to talk to me,” Louie the Lost said. “Whole world’s got questions, and I’m like Mr. Answer Man. Phone’s ringing off the hook.”

“Well, let it ring. Meet me at the North Pole in fifteen minutes.”

“Awwww,” Louie said. “Not the North Pole. Place is like Christmas for suicides. Hey, good name for one of them bands, huh? Christmas for—”

“It’s great,” I said. “I just met the guy who could manage them.” There were bright headlights in my rearview mirror, coming up fast, faster than I’d normally drive the twisting streets above the Boulevard. “Fifteen minutes. I’m in Blitzen.”

“That’s so cute,” Louie said. “Marge try to give you Dydie?”

The headlights were blinding. I angled the mirror down and said, “See you there,” and then I dropped the phone onto the passenger seat.

And the car rammed me.

I was taking yet another sharp curve, to the right this time, and the impact caught the left rear fender, swinging my car halfway around. I spun the wheel in the direction I’d been shoved and gunned the accelerator, and the car jumped the curb on the right and plowed eight or ten feet up an ivy-covered slope with a Norman castle on top of it. For a moment, I was afraid I was going to roll, but I kept accelerating and cranking the wheel to the right, and then I was heading back down through the ivy to the street, and the car that had hit me was already a hundred yards past me.

But it was turning around, making an ungainly three-point turn, and I could see why it had hit me so hard. The damn thing was a Humvee.

Since I’d essentially made a U-turn, I was facing back uphill, toward DiGaudio’s house. If I’m going to be chased, I’d rather be chased uphill, where I can get some muscle out of the eight-cylinder Detroit behemoth of an engine Louie wedged into my innocent-looking white Toyota. I downshifted and punched the accelerator again, leaving rubber on the street, the tail of the car whipping around as I straightened up and followed the yellow cones of my headlights back up the hill I’d just come down. A couple of mailboxes whipped past, and then it was a tight crook, almost a hairpin, to the left, and there was nothing to the right except fifty or sixty feet of vertical chaparral, and I found myself grateful that they hadn’t rammed me there, or I’d be waving at coyotes as I plummeted past them, hoping to land in somebody’s swimming pool.

Over the sound of my engine, I heard the souped-up roar of the Humvee, eating the distance between us, and its headlights briefly swung into my mirror and then out again as the road took another turn, right this time, and I ran it as fast as I could without losing the

pavement and fishtailing hopelessly through the flimsy guardrail and out into space, hoping that the Humvee's high center of gravity would force it to slow down, and then there was a hump in the road and I was briefly airborne and even before my tires hit the asphalt again, I saw the bright lights behind me.

Closing fast.

I own three Glock nine-millimeter automatics. They were neatly boxed up, wrapped in oilcloth and safe from rust, inside the storage lockers I keep in Burbank, Hollywood, and down near the airport. I had an electric screwdriver with me, but it was in the trunk, and it seemed unlikely that I'd be able to locate an outlet even if I managed to get the damn thing out without getting killed.

Tight to the right again, scraping the guardrail this time, fighting the urge to brake, and instead dropping the car into second as the road took a dip down, the San Fernando Valley glimmering off to my right, and suddenly on the left a little street called Carol Way opened up—a little earlier than I'd anticipated—and I slammed on the brakes, spun the wheel left, and jammed the accelerator again, a half-formed image of a driveway assembling itself in my mind even as I passed the yellow diamond-shaped sign that said DEAD END.

Carol Way was steep and narrow, just a series of drop-dead curves and suicide switchbacks that snaked along the side of the hill, a testimonial to the greed of some contractor who wasn't going to let a virtual cliff-face prevent him from carving out a few lots. The Humvee wasn't in my mirror yet, but I could see its lights sweeping the brush as it made the turn behind me, stabbing right and left through the darkness like a giant's flashlight. They slowed a little now, having seen the dead end sign. They probably figured either that I made a bad turn or was planning to back into some driveway and wait with my lights off as they rolled past.

But I wasn't depending on a driveway I could hide in. I was depending on my burglar's memory.

I slowed, too, resisting the urge to look at the rearview. I'd see their lights without looking at the mirror, and I didn't want to be blinded. But I needed them to be able to see me if there was going to be a chance of working.

And then there they were, accelerating behind me and closing the gap, and I heard a cracking sound and something whistled past my head and punched a spidery hole in my windshield. I would have zigzagged, but Carol Way was too narrow now, barely wider than my car, so I just put my head down and ransacked the lighted curbside as it slid past, and *there it was*, the first Whitley driveway, and I accelerated past it to the second one and cut the wheel right, too fast, slamming against the curb and banging my head on the roof of the car, but I got it under control and powered up the driveway that pointed to the top of the hill, to the Southern colonial mansion I'd broken into about six months ago.

And behind me, the Humvee made the turn and slowed, taking the narrow drive at a safe speed, because, after all, where could I go?

Around was where I could go. The Whitley's driveway was a big U that ran behind the house, past a gravel parking area smugly populated by a Lamborghini and a Bentley, and then swung left and went straight back down the hill to Carol Way again, and within eight to ten seconds, that's where I was, tires hitting high C as I pushed the car's weight downhill, seeing the Humvee's brake lights in my mirror, stuck partway up the second driveway, and knowing

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